From the banlieue to the burkini: the many lives of French republicanism

What future for French politics in an age of terrorism?

Edited by Emile Chabal

Introduction: the return of fear

Scholars have, for some time now, warned of an impending crisis of French politics. Fragmentation, ideological reorientation and widespread voter dissatisfaction have altered the boundaries of France's political system. An ever greater number of people seem to be unhappy with the present political "system" – whatever they take that to mean – and many of these have turned to protest parties to express their disillusionment. Since early 2014, these problems have been stretched to breaking point by the wave of terrorism that has swept across the country. The result has been the re-emergence of deep fears amongst the electorate – a fear of death, a fear of the outside world, and a fear that France may be on the verge of collapse.

These fears have a long history. Since the revolutionary tumult of the nineteenth century, the question of social cohesion and social control has played a prominent role in French politics. For the vast majority of French people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the overwhelming political priority was to avoid another revolution. The stabilisation of the Fifth Republic and the end of the colonial conflict in the 1970s evacuated this issue for a while, but it was only temporary: we now find ourselves in a position where the fear of collapse is, once again, a vital electoral concern. With the spectre of terrorism looming over French society, many people are asking themselves what kind of politics they want and how they want to be governed.

Nevertheless, the urgency of France's plight does not preclude cool-headed and historically-informed analysis. On the contrary, it has become more important than ever to see how fast-moving current events interact with longer historical trends. That is why the three essays that follow all bring together very recent current events with long-term processes. This is especially true in my essay, where I focus on how 'republicanism' – one of the most ubiquitous shibboleths of French political language – has been manipulated, reshaped and deployed in a shifting political landscape. By contrast, Michael C. Behrent tries to figure out what remains of the great political framework of modern politics: the left-right divide. And, finally, Camille Robcis explores the relationship between the recent migrant crisis and the changing shape of neo-liberalism in France.

We do not seek in our essays to have the final word on our subjects. Given the speed at which events develop, such a claim would be foolhardy at best. But we do offer something of an analysis of the shape of French politics, its pathologies, its blindspots and its priorities. We also suggest fruitful avenues for future research – whether that is into the dynamics of party-political formation or the dissemination of neo-liberal ideas. Most of all, we want to show that a close examination of French politics can simultaneously yield important insights into the direction of European politics in the years to come.

From the *banlieue* to the *burkini*: the many lives of French republicanism

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It has become a truism now to say that history weighs heavily on political debate in France. From the endless, unfinished battles over Vichy to more recent struggles over the colonial past, the legacy of the past continues to find its way into even the most banal political exchange. Some might find this insistently historicist mindset a welcome change to the amnesia and soundbite politics of the internet age; it certainly has the benefit of adding context to every political utterance. But it can also have a stultifying effect. It is not necessarily productive to see every social disturbance involving young ethnic minorities as a replay of the Algerian War, nor is it helpful for political actors to claim the mantle of some distant eighteenth-century political ideal like 'Enlightenment'. In fact, this facile use of history often serves to close down discussion and distract attention from present-day concerns and genealogies.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the interminable debates surrounding the Republic and republicanism. Even for those – like me – who believe that republicanism has become one of the key structuring languages of contemporary French politics, it is hard to believe just how deeply it has penetrated the political space.[1] In the past ten years, both the Front National (FN) and the far-left have sought to reclaim and repackage republicanism, a tradition to which they were both resolutely hostile only a few years before. This has happened in conjunction with a growing reliance on the language of republicanism amongst France's mainstream centre parties, to such an extent that the main centre-right party was renamed Les Républicains in 2015.

Inevitably, this bewildering cacophony of republicanisms has been accompanied by an onslaught of historical polemic. Republicanism's deep roots in French history make it a perfect candidate for manipulation and there have been no shortage of attempts to give today's ideas a historical glow. Since the 1990s, we have heard left-wing intellectuals like Régis Debray celebrate republicanism as a way of bringing back the revolutionary spirit of 1789 and groups like the Indigènes de la République denounce republicanism on the grounds that it is a direct continuation of France's colonial practices. Above all, in recent years, there have been heated disagreements about the 1905 separation of Church and State, which provides the basis for France's strong form of secularism (*laïcité*). Whether or not any of these references to history are accurate is beside the point; what matters most is that republicanism be fitted into a vast historical canvas stretching back to the French Revolution and beyond.

The problem is that, while some of these historical references are helpful to understanding present-day republicanism, most are not. For example, the ideological reconfigurations of the 1970s are much more important in explaining the re-emergence of republicanism in recent decades than the French Revolution of 1789. Likewise, the struggle to define *laïcité* in the 1990s has more to do with ethnic minority identity politics and the place of religion in late twentieth-century France than it does with the 1905 law. And, however significant the independence of Algeria in 1962, it is of surprisingly little relevance to the emergence of republican ideas of 'integration' in the 1990s and 2000s. In short, the only way to write about

[1] This essay is both an opportunity to develop and question the arguments I made in Emile Chabal, *A Divided Republic: nation, state and citizenship in contemporary France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

present-day republicanism is to break out of a historical teleology in which the only history that matters is the history of republicanism itself.[2]

But what does this mean in practice? And how can it help us make sense of today's complex, fractured political scene? I want here to offer a few brief insights into the shape and function of present-day republicanism – or, as I call it, 'neo-republicanism'. This means looking at where it came from and how it is being deployed in today's political environment. It also means deliberately ignoring the supposedly 'canonical' historical reference-points that form the bedrock of neo-republicanism. Above all, it means highlighting the uniqueness of neo-republicanism and exploring its power as a flexible and seductive language of politics. For, despite the fact that French republicanism has always aspired to become a universal and trans-historical value system, its very plasticity makes it highly dependent on specific contexts. At a time when everyone seems to be talking about the Republic, therefore, it is vital to understand what these contexts are.

Ideological reorientations and the roots of neo-republicanism

The first key point to emphasise is that neo-republicanism is a product of the ideological reorientations of the 1970s and 1980s.[3] When politicians and intellectuals in France today refer to the Republic, they may be talking about Jules Ferry, Marianne or the Dreyfus Affair, but they are actually developing an idea that emerged from the explosion of the Marxist consensus on the left and the atrophy of Gaullist ideas on the right in the 1970s. In this context of ideological fragmentation, a growing number of historians, intellectuals and political actors began to turn to republicanism as a model of political action and community that could replace the lost ideals of Gaullist grandeur and revolutionary Communism. Prominent figures like Pierre Nora, Alain Finkielkraut and Jean-Pierre Chevènement effected surprising transitions from youthful Marxism to middle-aged republicanism, while erstwhile Gaullists such as Jacques Chirac and Philippe Séguin found that republicanism gave them a way of talking about the French nation without sounding hopelessly out of date.

Initially, in the 1980s, the neo-republican turn was most clearly visible amongst the moderate socialist left. As François Mitterrand's socialist experiment collapsed in 1982-3 – and as the Parti socialiste (PS) faced an unexpected challenge from the far-right Front national (FN) – young socialists began to lean more and more heavily on a progressive republicanism in an effort to boost their governing credentials. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the bicentenary of the French Revolution and the first iteration of the so-called 'headscarf affair' – all of which took place in 1989 – the conversion of the moderate left to republicanism was almost complete. The Republic was an attractive, ready-made alternative to a now-discredited socialist ideology, and it provided a way for disaffected socialists to rally to strong political values. Not everyone agreed with the neo-republican wave that swept across the party, of course; defenders of *droit à la différence* in the 1980s and advocates for male-female electoral *parité* in the 1990s bemoaned the increasing reliance of the French left on a neo-republican framework. But they were gradually

[2] This echoes what Samuel Moyn has done for the history of human rights in his *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). He too argues that contemporary human rights discourse has its origins in the ideological transformations of the 1970s.

[3] I discuss this in more detail in Emile Chabal, 'French Political Culture in the 1970s: liberalism, identity politics and the modest state' in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (Vol. 42, No. 2, 2016), 243-265.

out-numbered so that, by the early 2000s, the moderate left had become firmly wedded to a neo-republican framework.

What was less clear at the time was the extent to which the right, too, had begun to domesticate republicanism. After a period in the 1980s when the centre-right had flirted with neo-liberal ideas of free markets and privatisation, the 1990s saw a renewed emphasis on statism and national sovereignty, combined with a growing interest in republicanism. In advance of the right's return to power in 1995, Jacques Chirac and his party used the idea of *la fracture sociale* to describe the present state of France, drawing on classic neo-republican themes such as the fear of national disunity and the need for social integration. Once in power, this trend continued. The threat of Algerian terrorism in the 1990s and the recurrent debates over the Islamic headscarf provided another point of entry for the right, which was able to use neo-republicanism as a bulwark against the alleged 'Islamisation' of France. This was particularly noticeable in discussions surrounding *laïcité*. Once a value firmly associated with the French left, by the early 2000s *laïcité* had become a rhetorical tool for the right to denounce all public expressions of the Muslim faith, from the building of mosques to the wearing of the *burqa* and *burkini*. It is hardly a coincidence that the 2004 law banning religious symbols in public schools and the 2010 ban on the covering of the face in public spaces should have coincided with periods of centre-right rule.

Even more surprising than this trend on the centre-right was the remarkable embrace of neo-republicanism by the far-right. This began in earnest with the nomination of Marine Le Pen as the leader of the FN in 2010. After more than two centuries during which the far-right had poured scorn on republican language and symbolism, suddenly Marine Le Pen's speeches were admonishing the French state for failing to uphold France's *valeurs républicaines* and urging it to use a more pro-active *laïcité* to combat everything from Islamic terrorism to the distribution of halal meat. The irony of this strategy was not lost on horrified socialist politicians, who realised that the neo-republicanism that had been developed in the 1980s in order to combat the rise of the FN was now being used by the FN to attack them.

To a degree, Marine Le Pen's accommodation to neo-republicanism has served her well and her party has continued to progress in national, regional and European elections. But the French electorate have not been entirely fooled; they recognise the difference between the neo-republicanism of the centre-left and the far-right. Thus, when the PS desperately called for a "republican front" to block the FN in the 2015 regional elections, it ensured that the FN were unable to win a majority in any region. And polls consistently show that, despite its new-found neo-republican sheen, few believe that the FN can be a credible party of government. Nevertheless, the widespread use of neo-republican language, ideas and symbols by centre-right and far-right politicians is more than just a cheap electoral strategy. It suggests a potentially new form of republicanism altogether.

Where the neo-republicanism that emerged from the ideological reorientations of the 1970s and 1980s was dominated by themes dear to the French left – such as anti-clerical secularism, revolutionary passion, and the French school – it is quite possible that the republicanism of the future will be dominated by themes that sit more comfortably with the right – such as anti-Muslim secularism, security, and the morality of the public space. Already, this shift was visible in the public controversy over the so-called "burkini bans" enacted by a cluster of centre-right and far-right mayors on the Côte-d'Azur in the summer of 2016. These debates mixed

a language of neo-republican *laïcité*, with concerns over "public order", "security" and morality. In the specific local context of south-eastern France, which has long been a bastion of far-right politics, such bans were widely accepted by the local electorate and could only be abrogated by an appeal to France's highest legal authority, the Conseil d'État.

Another consequence of a more obviously right-wing form of neo-republicanism is the further disintegration of a centre-left consensus on the nation and national identity. France was unique amongst Western European countries in the 1980s and 1990s in rejecting forms of multi-cultural pluralism that seemed to fit with the dominant neo-liberal, democratic and post-Communist paradigm. It was especially unique in that this rejection was led, until 1995, by a centre-left leader and a series of centre-left governments. Since then, however, many other Western European countries have begun to question the value of multiculturalism – often through very public debates about Islam, terrorism or citizenship tests. The result has been a Europe-wide hardening in legislative practice that no longer makes neo-republicanism appear so unusual. If, as seems to be the case, neo-republicanism becomes an ideology of the French right, it will soon become indistinguishable from straightforward nationalist ideologies that can be found in countries such as the UK or Germany. Such a shift is bound to benefit the right more than the left, not least because the latter have relied so heavily on neo-republicanism as a bulwark against the far-right.

But it is not just the political ecumenism of neo-republicanism that makes it unique; there has been another crucial transformation in the past four decades that has defined its shape, namely the rise of postcolonial identity politics. This is not as self-evident as it sounds. A good deal of scholarly and popular literature on contemporary France makes the claim that the country current "problems", particularly those associated with *laïcité* and national integration, are a replay or echo of the colonial past.[4] In this way, urban unrest in the *banlieues* has become an extension of the Algerian War and demands for ethnic minorities to "integrate" have been cast as a repackaged form of colonial "assimilationist" ideology. Unfortunately, in the same way that references to 1789 and the Dreyfus Affair have obscured the more recent roots of neo-republicanism, an insistence on remaking contemporary France in the image of the colonial past has obscured what is unusual about today's context.

The key point here is that France, like many Western European countries, has now become a land of postcolonial identity politics. In other words, the overwhelming majority of postcolonial activism in France – from anti-racism protests to local struggles over the placement of statues and memorials – focuses on group identity and memory. The origins of this development do not lie in the colonial period, but instead in the vast expansion of civil society mobilisation in the 1960s and 1970s. In the case of postcolonial minority groups, it was the *pieds-noirs* who first pioneered explicitly identity-based activism in their bitter battle for compensation that began in the early 1970s. This was followed by the emergence of a number of parallel organisations on the immigrant far-left.[5] As public debate over the colonial past became

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[4] A good example of this analysis is Andrew Hussey, *The French Intifada: The Long War Between France and its Arabs* (London: Penguin, 2014)

[5] On *pied-noir* activism, see Claire Eldridge, *From empire to exile: history and memory within the pied-noir and harki communities, 1962–2012* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016). On immigrant activism, the best account is Daniel A. Gordon, *Immigrants and Intellectuals: May '68 and the Rise of Anti-Racism in France* (Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2012).

increasingly prominent over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, a growing number of identity-based organisations found a place in the complex tapestry of French politics. This culminated in 2005 with the creation of organisation like the Conseil représentatif des associations noires (CRAN) and the Indigènes de la République amidst a nationwide polemic surrounding a law that required French schools to teach the "positive" aspects of French colonisation.

The cumulative impact of these developments has been to raise the profile of issues relating to the colonial past. Slavery, the Algerian War, the "plight" of French settlers, colonial violence, France's "responsibility" for its colonial past… all of these questions are now part of public debate. But they are also an integral part of neo-republicanism. As we have seen, the emergence of neo-republicanism coincided with a growing interest in postcolonial questions and, given the historic associations between French republicanism and France's civilising mission, it was inevitable that the two should become inextricably linked. Just as colonised peoples used mid-twentieth-century French republican rhetoric to demand greater independence from French tutelage, so today's disenfranchised minorities within metropolitan France are using neo-republicanism as a tool with which to attack the French state. This does not mean that France is still a colonial state, or that it treats its ethnic minorities in the same way as it treated "indigenous" peoples during the colonial period. Rather, what is happening today is a battle over ownership of the colonial past that is framed within the discursive world of neo-republicanism.

The growing enthusiasm with which the right has embraced neo-republicanism has only served to harden the debate. This is because, in recent decades, the right has been much more comfortable with discussions of "identity" than the left – witness, for example, the creation by Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007 of a Ministère de l'immigration, de l'intégration, de l'identité nationale et du Codéveloppement and the subsequent "grand débat sur l'identité nationale". Even though the ministry itself was disbanded shortly afterwards in 2010, the episode confirmed that "national identity" would be a major electoral tool for the right (and the far-right). And so it has proved to be, with right-wing politicians at local and national level increasingly claiming that "threats" to French national identity are simultaneously "threats" to French republicanism. Predictably, the response has been equally pointed on the part of ethnic minority and immigrant organisations, most of whom have roundly condemned the insufficiently "decolonised" Republic or the creeping "Islamophobia" of neo-republicanism. Indeed, the relatively soft and inclusive form of militancy of groups like SOS Racisme in the 1980s has given way today to the more strident and exclusive rhetoric of groups like the Indigènes de la République and the more recent Camp d'Été Décolonial.[6] Or, to put it another way, as neo-republicanism has increasingly begun to resemble a form of identity politics, it has given rise to oppositional forces that also explicitly use the language of identity.

Amidst this growing battle of identities, the centre-left has found itself completely disorientated. One of the reasons so many political actors on the centre-left were drawn to neo-republicanism in the 1980s was precisely because it seemed to be a response to identity politics. Neo-republicanism promised to re-energise civic citizenship and forge national unity through a new political contract. But its main tenets – above all, *laïcité* – are now wielded more effectively

[6] On the Indigènes de la République, see Houria Bouteldja & Sadri Khiari, *Nous sommes les indigènes de la République* (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2012). More details about the Camp d'Été Décolonial can be found here: https://ce-decolonial.org/.

by members of the renamed centre-right party Les Républicains than by any socialist politician. Even the prime minister Manuel Valls, who has long been a proponent of neo-republicanism, has found himself outflanked by his right-wing opponents. And the rest of the PS has struggled to develop a coherent response to the obvious manipulation by the right of neo-republican ideas in a context of global instability and terrorism.

What future for the Republic?

So what does this mean for the future of republicanism in France? Will the adoption of neo-republicanism by the right prove to be a step too far that will discredit republicanism entirely? If so, will we see a return to the period before 1960 when republicanism was largely absent from public debate in metropolitan France? Predictions for the future are notoriously hazardous, but such a turn-around seems unlikely in the near future. This is largely because, unlike any previous incarnation of republicanism, neo-republicanism emerged in a context in the 1970s when the French Republic no longer faced an existential threat. It has therefore found a home, not simply amongst specific political elites, but also amongst the French electorate much more widely. This is why arguments that neo-republicanism has become a repressive ideology or form of "state communitarianism" are so obviously inadequate.[7] At the regional, local and municipal level, political actors and voters of all different stripes have been engaging with neo-republicanism for years. Sometimes this has involved compromise – for example, in the funding of places of worship – and sometimes this has meant radicalisation – as in the case of the "burkini bans".[8] In both cases, neo-republicanism was used as the benchmark by which political action was judged.

This being the case, I strongly suspect that neo-republicanism is here to stay, especially given that it provides a way for the French to talk about such pressing issues as social cohesion, immigration and national identity. At the same time, I would expect there to be a growing number of political groups who seek to break out of the neo-republican paradigm altogether. As France's political, intellectual and business elites becomes ever more international, there is a good chance that neo-republicanism will appear increasingly parochial and ill-adapted to the complex realities of contemporary France. Already many of France's economic elites have little interest in engaging with polemical social debates over the future of the French language or forms of Islamic dress. The question is, if neo-republicanism is not the framework within which debate is conducted in France, what is? The task of creating a similarly expansive and flexible language of politics seems to be well beyond the capabilities of any political elite in France. Which may well leave us with neo-republicanism, whether we like it or not.

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[7] Étienne Balibar, 'Laïcité ou identité' in *Libération* (29 August 2016).

[8] This tension between compromise and radicalisation at the neighbourhood level is thoughtfully discussed in Beth Epstein, *Collective Terms: Race, Culture, and Community in a State-Planned City in France* (London: Berghahn, 2011).